

Alaska Loon and Grebe Working Group

Meeting Minutes 02/24/03

What: The Alaska Loon and Grebe Working Group (AL&GWG) was established to bring together biologists, scientists, managers, and citizens concerned about loons in the state of Alaska to improve communication, coordination, and collaboration among members and the public.

When and Where: The Alaska Loon and Grebe Working Group met at the Regional Office of US Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska, on Thursday and Friday, February 13th – 14th, 2003. This was the 6th meeting of the group since its formation in 1997.

Who: In attendance were the following individuals: Susan Earnst (USGS-Idaho), Kent Wohl (USFWS-Anchorage), Ann Wildman (ABR), Ed Mallek (USFWS-Fairbanks), Dave Yokel (BLM-Fairbanks), Joel Schmutz (USGS-Anchorage), Nancy Fair (USFWS-Anchorage), Doug Alcorn (USFWS-Anchorage), Bob Stehn (USFWS-Anchorage), Debbie Groves (USFWS-Juneau), Bob Platte (USFWS-Anchorage), Bill Larned (USFWS-Kenai), Julian Fischer (USFWS-Anchorage), Michael Vivion (USFWS-Yukon Flats), Paul Anderson (USFWS-Anchorage), Heather Wilson (USGS/UAF), Terri Zacher (HDL Engineering), Dale Fox (Anchorage Birding Tours), Lynn Noel (LGL), Tracey Gotthardt (AKNHP), Elizabeth Jowziak (USFWS-KNWR), Mark Bertram (USFWS-Yukon Flats), and Tamara Mills (USFWS-Anchorage), Tom Rothe (ADFG-Anchorage).

Agenda Items:

Thursday, 13 February

1. Upcoming Meetings and Websites of Interest – Tamara Mills

Websites- A compilation of websites related to loons, grebes, and wetlands management was created and made available to attendees. As this list is an evolving document, many relevant websites may not be listed. Please contact Tamara Mills at 786-3517 or via email: Tamara_Mills@fws.gov if you know of a website to add or if you would like a copy of the existing list.

Meetings – The SIL Limnology & Waterbirds Conference will be held in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada on August 4-7, 2003. Topics of the conference include the ecology of loons and grebes. For more information you can checkout their website at www.links.umoncton.ca/lw/ . Abstracts are due by April 1st.

2. Efforts of Pilots to Monitor Loons and Grebes – Debbie Groves

Discussion began at the 1999 Alaska Loon and Grebe Working Group Meeting on obtaining the loon data that are collected in Canada during the annual North American Waterfowl Breeding Population Survey. (Grebes are not counted during this survey outside of Alaska.) The data in their current format are still unavailable to the Working Group, and progress has been slow in getting them converted to a format where they can be retrieved for summary and analyses. Some discussion occurred regarding the value of the data, mainly because large areas of loon habitat are not surveyed. Questions also arose about aircraft types used over time and about the consistency of observers in recording loons during surveys. The group agreed that it is still worth trying to obtain the data, since so little other loon population information exists for Canada. The presence of RTLO and YBLO on the new Birds of Conservation Concern list and the development of National and Alaska Waterbird Plans, which require population estimates, could be used as leverage to raise the priority for making the data accessible.

Action Item: Debbie will write up a brief statement of goals and objectives that can be taken forward to Migratory Bird Management to increase the visibility of this issue.

3. Grebes in Alaska – Tamara Mills

The status and trends of Red-necked and Horned Grebes in North America and Alaska was discussed. Breeding Bird Survey and Christmas Bird Count data indicate that Horned Grebes may be significantly declining in their range. Red-necked Grebes seem to be increasing in numbers. Data on these grebe species in Alaska is sparse and limited and there were discussions on the limited visibility and detection of grebes from aerial surveys.

Action Item: The Alaska Waterbird Plan (draft due at the end of 2003) will include section on status, trends, and management recommendations for grebes.

4. Yellow-billed Loon Status Assessment – Susan Earnst

The Status Assessment and Conservation Plan for Yellow-billed Loons is in its final draft and has just been peer reviewed. The document reviews literature and unpublished data on Yellow-billed Loon population size, trend, and ecology. It highlights reasons for concern about this rare and patchily distributed species in Alaska. The Conservation Plan section details 7 objectives to guide research and monitoring. The document will be available in a few weeks by request from Susan (Susan_Earnt@usgs.gov); otherwise it will be available as a FWS technical publication in roughly 6 months.

5. State's Perspective on Yellow-billed Loons and Other Species of Concern – Tom Rothe

The Yellow-billed Loon (YBLO) has come to the attention of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) as a potential species of special concern. The Species of Special Concern List is periodically reviewed, including a public

call for nominations of species. This list is an administrative function under the authority of the ADF&G Commissioner. To date, the Yellow-billed Loon has not been nominated, but an internal ADF&G nomination is being prepared. The biennial call for nominations is considerably overdue, so it is uncertain when nominations will be accepted. Designation as a Species of Special Concern by the state serves as an internal warning system but does not require specific legislatively mandated action as it pertains to management or research.

6. Reproductive Success and Contaminants Exposure in Red-throated Loons / Yellow-billed Loon Telemetry Study– Joel Schmutz

Studies on Red-throated Loon nesting success, brood success, and productivity continue on the Y-K Delta, Copper River Delta, and Cape Espenberg. A population model that was developed using two scenarios of population trends (one in decline, the other being stable), coupled with the high variability from year-to-year, illustrates the need for long-term data collection on reproductive success of the Red-throated Loon.

Contaminants were also examined on samples from Red-throated Loons from the same study sites. Lead was not apparent in any samples, adults do not appear to pass selenium on to their young, and most eggs fell within a normal range for PCB levels with the exception of a few.

Telemetry studies indicate that Yellow-billed Loons from the North Slope are wintering along the northern coasts of Japan, Korea, China, and the southern coast of Russia. It appeared the 5 transmitted Yellow-billed Loons followed similar migration patterns traveling from their point of capture at Inigok, to the coast of St. Lawrence Island, to Kamchatka, Sakhalin, and on to the coast of Korea and China (last transmitted location to date).

7. NPRA - A Western Arctic Synthesis – John Schoen

Audubon Alaska synthesized available information and narratives on selected species, resources, special areas, etc., for the arctic coastal plain. They wanted to get an overall picture of diversity and focus conservation efforts on areas of biological importance. Several data layers make up maps that illustrate biological, industrial, and commercial distribution and activities across the arctic coastal plain including the National Petroleum Reserve (NPRA). The maps and other documentation are available on CD from Audubon Alaska.

8. NPRA – Environmental Impact Statement – Dave Yokel

This presentation about the current NPRA environmental impact statement (EIS) was put together by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for briefings in Washington, D.C. The EIS addresses what lands should be opened for oil and gas drilling by considering 16 issues. The EIS also includes four alternatives that range from no leasing to identification of habitats important to key species. BLM is currently accepting public comment until 03/18/03.

9. Yellow-billed Loon Registry – Ann Wildman

The Yellow-billed Loon registry is a database that contains a review of all YBLO sightings from gray literature and ongoing surveys. The database has two main components, an OCCURRENCE file that describes each observation of a loon group, individual, nest, or brood, and a SURVEY file that contains descriptive information for each survey conducted. The data structure is designed to be used in conjunction with a custom ArcView 3.2 extension. It provides tools to aid in visually displaying and querying data on both species occurrence and survey coverage in a specified area.

Northern Alaska Ecological Services (USFWS) office contracted with ABR Inc., to compile the registry and with Geonorth, Inc. to write the ArcView extension. A prototype is available for distribution. There are important data sets missing from the registry, primarily USFWS-funded surveys.

After Ann's talk, it was brought up that Philip Martin and Susan Earnst are working on Ethics Guidelines that a) state which uses of the data are ethical without permission from the data originator, and b) that provides a clear assurance to data originators that data will not be distributed or used for research, reports, or publications without their permission. Comments from the ALGWG Executive Committee and full membership will be solicited.

10. Southcentral Alaska Loon Survey – Bob Stehn, Bill Larned, Bob Platte, and Tamara Mills

Southcentral Alaska loon survey design, procedure, and results were presented and discussed. The meandering survey design was in overall agreement with standard transect surveys. Results reveal a high density of loons on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and aerial surveys will be flown again in 2003 to get more distribution data and continued monitoring of core areas.

11. Development of a Survey Design for the Yellow-Billed Loon – Julian Fischer

A recent meeting was held to discuss the objectives and design of aerial surveys for Yellow-billed Loons on the arctic coastal plain, particularly within NPRA. The survey is likely to be conducted at the end of the North Slope Eider survey in mid-June and will focus on collecting information that will aid BLM in management decisions regarding oil and gas leasing. The main objectives are to obtain data on distribution and abundance that can be used in a GIS-based habitat model.

Friday, 14 February

12. Subsistence Harvest and New Regulations – Bill Ostrand

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act has been amended to allow for the legal take of birds during a subsistence hunt. The Alaska Co-management Council (AMBCC) is the advisory body responsible for recommending inclusion/exclusion of specific species to the list. The current list of species proposed to be open for subsistence includes the legal take of all loons and grebes.

13. Subsistence Harvest Data – Cynthia Wentworth

The most up-to-date data reveals most of the take of loons occurs on the Y-K Delta. However, because this is also the longest and most reliable of the harvest surveys the take of loons across other parts of the state may be underestimated. Few grebes are reported on harvest surveys. There is a need for better species identification so more accurate estimates of individual species can be made. . For example, the estimated take of hundreds of Yellow-billed Loons annually on the Y-K Delta is probably not valid.

14. Leads and Loons – The Poisoning of a Pacific Loon on the Y-K Delta – Heather Wilson

While conducting eider studies on the Y-K Delta, a Pacific Loon was found immobile, and eventually dead. Necropsies revealed the cause of death to be from lead poisoning after the ingestion of lead shot. This raises concern as it indicates that the effects of available spent lead shot may be more widespread than previously considered.

Other cases of lead poisoning have occurred from ingestion of lead sinkers and jigs (4 known cases in southcentral Alaska, 3 Common and 1 Pacific). Lead poisoning is thought to be the leading cause of mortality in adult Common Loons in the Northeast.

Heather is going to write up a short communication for publication regarding this incident.

15. Anchorage Loons and a GIS Mapping Project – T. Mills

Anchorage Audubon provided a few paragraphs on loon conservation projects they have been involved in and are supporting in the future. Recently, a grant was awarded to members of Anchorage Audubon to place a remote camera at a Pacific Loon nesting platform. This provides an excellent educational and biological opportunity for local loon conservation.

In addition, funding was recently provided to Dale Fox of Anchorage Birding Tours to pay for materials for roping off an area of shoreline on DeLong Lake where Pacific Loons have traditionally attempted nesting.

Another project for local loon conservation was the creation of a GIS Maps that displays potential threats and remaining suitable habitat at 10 Anchorage area

lakes. Anchorage Audubon provided funding to Alaska Conservation Foundation to create the maps from data collected by the USFWS.

16. Alaska LoonWatch – T. Mills

The Alaska LoonWatch continues to thrive in southcentral Alaska and will be enhanced this year with the help of an intern. Because volunteers have moved and some lakes are no longer monitored, there is a need for higher effort to be placed on collecting data on lake use and recruiting new volunteers. There are also plans to create a website dedicated to the Alaska LoonWatch for increased visibility, participation, and as a source of information for citizens, communities, and organizations.

17. Knik Arm Ferry/Bridge Update – T. Mills

Plans were released in the fall of 2002 for the creation of the Knik Arm Ferry. Public open houses and comment periods were conducted and an environmental impact assessment is planned for both the Point McKenzie area and Anchorage/Ship Creek. The ferry could be operating as early as 2004.

However, recent debate by Ted Stevens and Don Young may stall the ferry project with efforts placed into the construction of a bridge. More information can be found at www.knikarmferry.com/ .

18. Learning about Loons: An Education Project on the Kenai Peninsula – T. Mills

An education project about loons on the Kenai Peninsula is being developed collaboratively by Kenai National Wildlife Refuge staff, USFWS Migratory Bird Management, USGS, Fairwinds Inc., and Biodiversity, Inc. and scheduled to begin in 2004. This program will provide an opportunity for young adults to participate in a hands-on scientific investigation while learning about loons and loon conservation in the local community.

In anticipation of the 2004 program, a team of biologists and support staff will be banding and taking biological samples from loons this summer on the Kenai Peninsula. The work will also involve placing satellite transmitters on two loons to track movements.

19. North American Waterbird Plan and Alaska Waterbird Plan – T. Mills

A meeting was held in August of 2001 to discuss the second volume of the National Waterbird Plan. This volume would include management plans for “marshbirds” or other birds, such as loons or grebes, which were not included in first waterbird plan. Typically, the National Waterbird Plans are completed before the Regional Plans. Data needed for each loon and grebe species includes population estimates (N.A.) and source and qualifiers, and population goals with rationale for the goals. Kent Wohl will find out more regarding expected

completion date of the National plan. Tamara Mills and Susan Earnst are working with the coordinators of the National Waterbird Plan to assure that Alaska issues are addressed as the ALGWG sees fit. Any participation in this process by other ALGWG members is welcome.

Action Item: A Writing Team was suggested for the Alaska Waterbird Plan (Bill Larned, Joel Schmutz, Susan Earnst, Tamara Mills), but others are welcome to volunteer. Tamara Mills will coordinate writing efforts. An outline will be created for the plan (mirroring that of the Alaska Shorebird Plan), with members of the Writing Team and other ALGWG members writing the sections. The Plan will be based on existing Status Assessments for Red-throated and Yellow-billed Loons and similar information to be compiled for Pacific Loons, Common Loons, and grebes in Alaska. We plan to complete the first draft of the Alaska Waterbird Plan, for review by the full ALGWG, by the end of 2003.

20. Charter Discussion – Kent Wohl

Discussion centered on the level of formality the group should have and how decisions on relevant issues should be made. It was general agreement that the AK Loon and Grebe Working Group should provide others with information for sound scientific and management decisions, but should avoid making recommendations or actions of advocacy. An executive committee was established and consists of Debbie Groves, Susan Earnst, Joel Schmutz, and Tamara Mills. Executive committee members will be responsible for annual meetings, getting relevant information to group members, and if needed, making decisions about issues.

Mechanisms for providing statements as a group to managers and supervisors was discussed and will be conducted on a trial basis.

Action Item: Susan Earnst will be writing a revised version of the charter to include amendments discussed at the meeting. After the charter is accepted by the Executive Committee, it will be forwarded to the full ALGWG for comment.

21. Next Meeting

The next annual meeting was not discussed, but in all likelihood will occur in conjunction with the next Alaska Bird Conference in the spring of 2004 in Anchorage.